

review

Vicki Viidikas: New and Rediscovered

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Edited by Barry Scott

*Stephen Conlon
Graduate School of English
Assumption University
stephenconlon@lycos.com*

Writing this review of a posthumously published book of poems in verse and prose by a woman I knew very briefly in the late 1980s has been a cathartic experience. I first met Vicki Viidikas when I had just finished my doctoral dissertation and was managing the Sandringham Hotel in Newtown. One of my jobs there was to book bands. I approached Michael Wilding, who had supervised my Ph.D. and asked for his help in finding poets so that I could have a regular Saturday afternoon residency-type of gig. I had several song writers who wanted to read or recite their lyrics: Dave Studdert, Louis Tillett among them. Michael suggested that I meet Vicki and two other poets, Robert Adamson and Stephen Oliver. After reading some of her work, Vicki asked me if she could have a room in the hotel, as she was short of money and had nowhere to live. At that time, the upper story of the hotel was a kind of half way house for other artists anyway, so I gave her a room.

I didn't ask her about any substances she was or was not taking....many of the inner city bands' habits made such questions pointless. She sometimes came downstairs, bringing her own drinks, to listen to bands like Paris Green or Roaring Jack who were also in residency at that time. I turned a blind eye to her smuggling of drinks too.

Eventually the hotel's owner came to one of the Saturday afternoon gigs to see what I was doing...some of the locals (posties, brickies, wharfies) were gossiping to the owner about the "weirdos and freaks" who were taking over the pub and making their quiet Saturday afternoon drinking sessions unbearable. The owner took an instant dislike to Vicki and Vicki reciprocated. I started thinking that the owner may have been jealous as Vicki was the only female performer and she seemed to challenge the owner's position. Vicki wasted no time telling the owner what she thought of her. This went on for a month or so until finally Vicki moved out of the hotel and stopped coming to the afternoon gigs.

What I remember about her readings was that she was very withdrawn at first, but as she continued to recite her work, her voice became stronger, although there was still a brittle nervousness to her performances. The audience was not exactly receptive to her; but they weren't that receptive to anyone for that matter. This made for an atmosphere at once crazy, frenetic and chaotic. But Vicki didn't seem to take much notice of that; she didn't let it bother her: she was going to read and speak her mind, no matter what...unpretentiously yet adamantly. Part of the problem with the audience was that it wasn't what could be called bourgeois. Newtown in the mid to late 1980s was still a working class area and the hotel was very distinctly working class. When Vicki had a confrontation with some local, I'd ask myself why she was putting herself through this. Was it self destruction or self denial? She was a fish out of water in that scene.

These were some of my impressions at that time that have remained unresolved. Since I started reading some of her work from the recently published *Vicki Viidikas: New and Rediscovered*, some responses to such questions have been flooding my mind, making the writing of this review as much a review of my past and the short time I spent in Vicki's presence as it is a review of her work independent of that time. But I can't stop myself filtering her poems through my memories of her, the poet who made being in the wrong place at the wrong time into a virtue. I see now through a glass darkly perhaps, but that glass is what makes Vicki's images so brutally stark and raw. The edges of her image are sharpened, not rounded by the passage of time and the tricks memory plays on me.

From "Future", a prose poem, I read:

It really doesn't matter if I met him in a bar, picked him up or was picked up, in the morning he pushed me out of bed saying, "You must go, my wife's due back" And catching the 7.43 am bus I thought, it doesn't really matter, what did I expect?

Behind the brutal honesty is a sense of her vulnerability at the hands of the adulterous lying man who has pushed her out in the early hours of the morning. The recording of the exact time of the bus tells us that she was hurt; I can see her sitting alone on a deserted bus trying to hide her hurt feelings behind the self-accusing disclaimer of "what did I expect?" She then remembers that as a girl she was told by a fortune teller "You will travel!" The mundane irony of the bus trip fulfilling this fortune makes me think that she would have a bitter laugh at her own life when things turned sour.

Again, in "Loaded Hearts", Vicki is writing from within the destructive element of a kind of community house where:

Our fingers are snarling in chaos

Oh take it easy baby the lords have too many kingdoms
They're playing darts with hypodermics
The fools are recording pain
We're making weapons from our dreams

These stunning images stick together; they are slammed into each other through the poet's own mind-forged manacles, to use an image from William Blake. This vision comes out of the place, possibly somewhere in India, peopled by the lost or at least dispersed souls whom she has met in one of her several sojourns there,. But there is no sense of recollections coming as memories: she is in the scene she describes, observing without judging. She sees all the others finally coming together in "our dreams". She has this ability to respond with immediacy to the nightmarish world while "Tigers are eating through walls and Hendrix is playing from hell" and where "The fridge is full of dope and he's trying to live a quiet life". The words she shapes are "loaded hearts", like intoxicated guns. The image, again, is loaded with so many possibilities, all of which seem to pull the sense apart; but not quite. The poet who can remain cogent in this turmoil doesn't write words that fall apart. Her will to say what she feels remains strong. And yet, there are the ejaculations that start several lines: "Oh boy", "O sigh" and Oh gee". Here I sense the vulnerability of a young and innocent language that seems out of place in this whirl of crazy experience. The two voices are crashed together to make us sense that the one thing we aren't told in the poem is what the writer is doing; but of course, she is the one recording these images and registering her love of them in the same words she registers her emotional distance in the adolescent ejaculations.

Her powers of sensuous observation come through in "O woman of the moon" where, following the title she slips into the wet body of the poem with the continuation of her utterance:

she is full with yearning
for the double-eye, night of fire, the bursting
of the blossom

The images seem to swim on the page in this Sapho-like hymn to the woman Vicki sees her reflection in as the moon silently shapes her world in a series of blended images. Such control appeals to the poet; it is the message she receives on the shore, before dawn, from “the harlot messenger” who has illuminated her “night of fire”:

so powerful her gaze to rearrange tides
twist the dolphins through the haze
of their slippery grey directions

There seems to be a desire to shape the life around her which comes out in the physical sensuality and suggestiveness of the images. Vicki is the moon poet and this poem is her shaping of her world away from the craziness of her material world of the men and women who we see in other poems make her life so vulnerable:

her face without a dream
her face which is the dream

This poem is the moon’s dream as seen by the poet while looking into her (own) face. She is the woman of the moon. Vicki’s dream seems to be her own “Bright Star”, only she is willing to show us the things that she tries to control. The moon’s message is the dream which is this dream poem.

For some unfathomable reason, I remember a line from a song on *Ego Tripping at the Gates of Hell*, an album Louis Tillett released around the time I knew Vicki: “I’m swimming in the mirror”, sung by a female voice in counterpoint to Louis’ line “to swim alone with you”. For Vicki, swimming alone in her poem gives her the power

to create an image of the life she longs for. Like Louis, Vicki seems to be singing to herself, to reassure herself that her “giving off her message, satin smooth” brings her the closure she needs without needing a full stop to end the poem.

This poem seems to float on the page, just as the moon’s images float on the water in Vicki’s eyes. To interpret this poem beyond this point is to miss the point: it is to be experienced, not analysed into a single thesis statement. All I can do is register my emotional impressions as I read it. And, perhaps, that would be all Vicki would want. It would make her happy.

In “Fig” I can now hear Vicki’s frenetic and nervous voice as she burrowed over the microphone on the milk crate stage of the hotel. It hits me from the opening:

It was all the time
you were going
leaving bare seeds along the ground

You were fig
so much texture something rich
to put the mind around

Burst fig not wanting
to be open at the core

I hear the mixture of blame, frustration and fulfillment in this break-up poem with yet another person whose promise of fertility proved sterile. She realizes that he was all the time “spilling seeds that will not grow”. The gaps in the middle of the lines suggest the hollowness or emptiness she feels and yet she seems to open him up in these lines despite his not wanting to be opened. She bursts the fig with her tongue as she enunciates the words. For someone like

Vicki, who seems to open herself to the core in every line she writes, such a relationship would be as doomed as the one she experienced in “Future” where love has slipped yet again through “my fingers spread out to touch”.

While the men and women she writes to and of may have not been able to respond, we the readers of these poems can respond. By opening ourselves to the raw emotions, the wild images, the sincerity of her voice, we can, at least, offer to her a sense of fulfillment or completion. She seems to predict this when she writes in “The Letter”, where she asks herself and the reader:

How
to describe these things?

She cannot, so she writes, as in a letter to her readers as much as to her lover:

The flesh of the word,
the tongue of his love
I won't try to speak of these,
you'll feel then and understand
they transport
and are in this world.

This is her request to us: feel the words and the emotions she breaks out of them, then you will understand her and she will transport you back into this world, the one we share in all its raw physicality and honesty.

Vicki Viidikis is unique. This may explain why she never seemed to fit into any one “scene” for very long and why she experienced so much disappointment. But it also may be the source of her strength as she remained true to herself while she kept moving on to look for life.

Did she ever find it? I don’t know. She, like so many others from the time I knew her, is gone. And then I read her poems and she still brings life back to me. That is her gift, I guess. I now have a sense of loss. I too am frustrated; not for myself, but for all the artists I have known who remain undervalued or even forgotten in their own country.

In bringing so much of Vicki’s writing together, Barry Scott has done an invaluable thing for Vicki and for the rest of us. My one regret is that I never recorded her voice on those Saturday afternoons when she read her poems to the punters in Newtown. It is still there in her poems; only, for new readers, without the extra texture of having known her in the flesh, which is how she seemed to insist on knowing life. The experience of reading these poems makes Vicki for me not only new and rediscovered, but remembered.

References

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